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Article

## Left Behind? Migration Stories of Two Women in Rural China

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### Abstract

Women being left behind in the countryside by husbands who migrate to work has been a common phenomenon in China. On the other hand, over time, rural women's participation in migration has increased precipitously, many doing so after their children are older, and those of a younger generation tend to start migrant work soon after finishing school. Although these women may no longer be left behind physically, their work, mobility, circularity, and frequency of return continue to be governed by deep-rooted gender ideology that defines their role primarily as caregivers. Through the biographical stories of two rural women in Anhui, this article shows that traditional gender norms persist across generations. Yingyue is of an older generation and provided care to her husband, children, and later grandchildren when she was left behind, when she participated in migration, and when she returned to her village. Shuang is 30 years younger and aspires to urban lifestyle such as living in apartments and using daycare for her young children. Yet, like Yingyue, Shuang's priority is caregiving. Her decisions, which are in tandem with her parents-in-law, highlight how Chinese families stick together as a safety net. Her desire to earn wages, an activity much constrained by her caregiving responsibility to two young children, illustrates a strong connection between income-generation ability and identity among women of the younger generation. These two stories underscore the importance of examining how women are left behind not only physically but in their access to opportunities such as education and income-generating activity.

### Keywords

caregiving; China; left behind; rural–urban migration; women

### Issue

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### 1. Introduction

A well-known phenomenon accompanying the voluminous rural–urban migration in China over the past four decades is migrants leaving behind other family members in their villages and places of origin. Left-behind women, left-behind children, and left-behind elderly are seen across China, particularly in the countryside, with unofficial and widely accepted estimates of 61 million, 47 million, and 50 million respectively (Ye, 2019). Nonetheless, rural women's participation in migration has increased precipitously and is now almost as high as that of men. Indeed, demographer Duan Chengrong and his colleagues (Duan, Chen, & Qin, 2017) found that the

number of left-behind wives in China's countryside had declined by 20% between 2010 and 2015. If women are no longer left behind physically, or at least not as much as before, do their roles in the family also change and if so, how? This article aims at deepening our understanding of how rural women in China are left behind by their male family members not only physically but in terms of opportunities and choices.

In this article, we argue that women who have opportunities to participate in migration, by for example joining other male migrants of the family, particularly their husbands, continue to be constrained by their traditional roles as wives and caregivers. In other words, not being left behind does not necessarily signal fundamental

changes in gender norms, roles, and decision-making regarding women's access to opportunities such as education and income-generation activities. We illustrate the deep-rooted gender ideology that governs left-behind and migrant women alike and that persists across generations by telling the stories of two women in Anhui, as part of a longitudinal study of rural households consisting of a series of interviews throughout the period 1995 to 2019.

The next section outlines the origins of Chinese women's prescribed roles and the impacts of gender norms on the division of labor within marriage and on migration. After that, we review the phenomenon of voluminous rural–urban migration in China, focusing on the split-household strategy. Migrant households' flexibility and frequent changes call for the use of longitudinal information such as household biographies, which the following section describes. Then, we tell the stories of two women, through tables that document whether they are 'inside' or 'outside,' with respect to the home village, by year, and narratives on decision-making about location, work, and activity for them and their family members. The article's conclusion calls for attention to not only women left behind in location but women left behind in access to opportunities.

## 2. Gender, Marriage, and Migration in China

To understand the persistence of women's subordinate and caregiving roles in Chinese families, one must start with the Confucian prescriptions of social positions, that is, each person's role in society is defined by his/her position relative to others. The Chinese woman is defined in relation to, and subordinate to, other males in the family: a daughter in relation to her father; a wife in relation to her husband; and a mother in relation to her son(s). What's more, historically the labor, fertility, and person of Chinese women have been considered a property exchanged through marriage, a social and transactional institution, to the husbands' family (Croll, 1984). Under the patrilocal tradition, a married woman would leave her natal family and move to and become a member of the husband's family. The transfer of a woman's responsibility and obligation to the in-laws not only helps continue the husband's family line, but also adds pragmatic and economic values in terms of augmenting labor resources, the formation of networks, and provision of old-age security (Fan & Huang, 1998). To this day, the patrilocal tradition remains, especially in rural areas. This tradition is key to explaining women's persistently low status because the eventual loss of daughters discourages the natal family from investing in their education relative to sons, as illustrated by the age-old saying that having a daughter is like 'water spilled out.' The bride price is both symbolically and materially a compensation by the husband's family to the natal family for raising a daughter and losing her eventually, but it further institutionalizes the transactional nature of marriage as well as the notion of women as property.

Based on deep-rooted ideology that governs gender roles and fosters gender inequality, the division of labor between women and men in the household has become cemented over thousands of years. This is aptly summarized by the inside–outside dichotomy: 'The woman's place is inside the family and the man's sphere is outside the family' (*Nv zhu nei nan zhu wai*; Mann, 2000), meaning women are responsible for domestic duties and caregiving while men are responsible for earning income and activities outside the family.

Despite the notion that 'women hold up half the sky' as well as policies that increased women's labor force participation, popularized and implemented during Mao's regime, and despite the rise in women's educational attainment over the past decades, traditional gender norms have stubbornly prevailed (Hannum, 2005; Ji, Wu, Sun, & He, 2017). The phenomenon of 'left-over women' (*shengnv*), women who are highly educated and/or highly accomplished and who have difficulties finding husbands, exemplifies the persistent gendered expectation for women in marriage to be inferior and subordinate to men (Ji, 2017). The prevalence of 'marriage corners' or 'marriage markets' in Chinese cities is further testament that the marriage matching game, whose rules uphold male superiority and female subordination, continues to undermine women's identity as independent actors and achievers (Gui, 2017). While the above examples tend to be found in cities more than in the countryside, in rural China, women's status is no better. While under Mao the collectives were responsible for rural production, since the market reforms that began in the 1980s, the peasant household has once again become the basic production and consumption unit. Left with only farmland—and in many cases grossly insufficient farmland—rural Chinese are deprived of a social safety net and support from the state. In the household, women's subordinate status is reinforced, while men cement their positions as household heads socially and economically (Park, 1992). What's more, the state's failure to ensure sustainable livelihoods for the rural Chinese leaves them no options but to leave for migrant work. Millions of women are physically 'left behind' by husbands who are in the cities doing migrant work, leaving all farming, house chores, and caregiving responsibilities to the wives. In addition to responsibilities within the home, wives now take up farming, animal husbandry, and other non-farm work in the home village. Jacka (2006) describes this phenomenon as a shift in the boundary between women's 'inside' realm and men's 'outside' sphere, namely; inside now includes all village responsibilities and outside now includes migrant work.

Since the 1990s, an increasing number of women, including married women, have joined the migrant labor force. This is mainly because migrant work has become an extremely important source of income and a way of life for rural Chinese. When both the husband and wife undertake migrant work, child-rearing and farming duties may be carried out by their left-behind parents

(Chang, Dong, & MacPhail, 2011). But even if wives do participate in migrant work, and are not physically left behind, their primary duties may continue to be defined by caregiving for the old, the young, and the spouse. As we seek to show in this article, wherever rural women are, they tend to play a supporting role, with caregiving as their priority and primary expectation, dominating and determining other life and mobility decisions that they make or that are made for them.

### 3. Migration in China

Rural–urban migration, which provides cheap labor for industrialization, has been a key driver of the spectacular economic performance in China since the 1980s, marked by two-digit annual economic growth until recent years. At the same time, the level of urbanization skyrocketed at an unprecedented rate, increasing from only 18% in 1978 to 56% in 2015 (Wu, 2016). From a largely immobile society prior to the 1980s, China has quickly become a nation where approximately one-sixth of the population, or nearly 250 million in 2015, are on the move, mostly to seek work (National Bureau of Statistics of China [NBSC], 2016a).

Instead of settling down in urban areas, Chinese rural migrants have pursued a split-household strategy, by circulating between the workplace and home village and leaving behind some family members. This strategy is well explained by the new economics of labor migration theory, noting that circular migrants can continue to make full use of family resources such as land and housing in the origin, and at the same time access employment opportunities at the destination, thus maximizing income and minimizing risk (Hugo, 1982). In addition, the *hukou* system, which was formally implemented in the late 1950s and entitled urban Chinese to state benefits and subsidies while allocating farmland to rural Chinese as their livelihood, in essence, separated the population into an urban segment and a rural segment. It is also a persistent barrier to rural migrants' permanent settlement in cities. The *hukou* system and its impacts are well documented in the literature and therefore will not be detailed here (e.g., Cheng, Guo, Hugo, & Yuan, 2013; Fu & Ren, 2010; Wu, 2004), but in short, without urban *hukou*, rural migrants continue to have difficulties accessing housing, good jobs, education, and other services in cities. Not surprisingly, therefore, migrants may prefer to hold on to their rural resources such as farmland, in the event that they return to the countryside for good in the future (Chen & Fan, 2016).

In terms of who moves in a migrant household and who stays behind, Duan and his colleagues have identified four conceptual stages of household arrangement (Duan, Lv, & Zou, 2013). The first stage involves migrants who leave during the farming off-season to work in the city, mostly migrating alone and returning home during the farming season. During the second stage, couple migrants pursue work in cities, leaving behind children to

be taken care of by grandparents or other relatives. The reunification of the nuclear family constitutes the third stage when migrant parents arrange for their children to join them in the host city. Finally, the fourth stage involves the migration of the extended family.

The first three stages of Duan's conceptual framework have been supported by empirical research. During the 1980s, migrant work was regarded as a new means to increase income for rural households, and most migrants were singles (single migration) or married men (sole migration), the latter typically leaving behind wives to shoulder farming and childcare responsibilities (Fan, Sun, & Zheng, 2011). By the 1990s, migrant work had become even more prevalent, such that 'couple migration' where both the husband and wife leave for urban work became increasingly common. According to China's censuses, the percentage of both the household head and the spouse being migrants increased from 7.44% in 1990 to 46.06% in 2000 (Duan, Yang, Zhang, & Lu, 2008). Since the 2000s, the nuclear-family arrangement, where both the spouse and children join migrants in urban areas, has fast gained prominence (Fan & Li, 2019).

Yet, what the above cross-sectional data and observations fail to reveal is the flexibility with which migrants change their household arrangement in terms of who leaves and who stays, where they work, what kind of jobs they have, how long they stay in the location of migrant work, and how long before they return to the village, if they do. Due to these frequent changes, longitudinal and biographical information is much more powerful in illustrating the extent to which individuals in the household participate in migration, their roles in enabling others to engage in migrant work, and the intra-household, inter-generational, and gendered divisions of labor that facilitate increase of household income while at the same time meeting household needs such as caregiving. For example, by analyzing longitudinal histories of rural migrants, Chen and Fan (2018a) find that the timing of a woman's initial migration is sensitive to her caregiving responsibility to dependent children and the elderly in the countryside, while that of men is not sensitive to either. Along the same vein, the number of left-behind children influences the frequency with which a female migrant returns to the village but has no effect on the return of male migrants (Chen & Fan, 2018b). Based on household biographies, Fan and Wang (2008) highlight migrants' frequent changes in location, activities, and household arrangement in order to access urban job opportunities, guard rural resources, and meet caregiving needs. Observations like the above would not have been possible without longitudinal stories told by the migrants and their family members.

### 4. Data and Household Biographies

The collection of longitudinal and biographical information of migrants is painstaking, and such data is rare. We are fortunate to have participated in a longitudinal

survey of 300 rural households in 12 villages in Anhui and Sichuan provinces, comprising in-depth interviews on members of the household, their demographic characteristics and migration histories, important household events such as marriage, birth, and death, and interviewees' feedback about and assessment of migration. The survey was first launched in 1995 by the Research Center for Rural Economy of China's Ministry of Agriculture, in partnership with Renmin University. Anhui and Sichuan have been major sending provinces of rural migrant workers. All the villages selected for the survey have little per capita farmland and have sent out a large number of migrant workers. Interviews with the same households in 1995 and 2005, supplemented by further interviews in 2009, 2014, and 2019, allowed us to create longitudinal biographies for most of the households. Notably, each interview includes retrospective information, thus enabling a longitudinal record of both individuals and households.

One limitation of the data is that the completeness of the household biographies varies among households, which is due to three reasons. First, though the interviews followed structured guidelines, they were conducted in a conversational manner, an approach that migrants and villagers much prefer to a questionnaire. Second, different interviewees from the same household might be interviewed in different years, sometimes contributing to inconsistencies regarding information such as the exact year a household event occurred. Third, over time, more villagers have left for migrant work, to the extent that our contacts with some households have become difficult. Despite these limitations, our many visits to the field sites have allowed us to verify and correct information, and most importantly have pointed us to certain trends and consistencies in migrant and household practices.

In the following, we describe two household biographies, each focusing on a rural woman who has both participated in migrant work and been left behind. We selected these two women because their stories—in particular how their roles are shaped by their husbands' migrant work activities and the households' caregiving needs—are seen repeated among other households that we have interviewed, because their biographic information is quite complete and includes more recent information than most other households, and because our relationships with the two households enabled us to probe deeper during the respective conversations. Both households are from one county, in the northwestern and poorer parts of Anhui province—itsself also among the poorest provinces in China—where limited job opportunities and scarcity of farmland have encouraged villagers to pursue migrant work.

For each woman, we construct a biographical table that begins a little before she got married, codes her and her husband's locations each year as 'inside' or 'outside,' and notes their location and type of work as well as other notable household events. 'Inside' and 'out-

side' are marked by 'I' and 'O' respectively, depending on whether they stay within the boundary of the home 'town' (*zhen*), which may include incorporated villages, for more than six months continuously within a calendar year. Even if they work in the town and not the home village, they very likely live in the village or commute to the village frequently. On the other hand, if they stay in a different town within the same county, they are considered 'outside.' This is consistent with how rural Chinese typically speak in terms of "being inside [at home] this year" or "being outside that year" (Chen & Fan, 2018b). This inside–outside binary represents the dichotomy between rural and urban locations and by extension rural and urban work, whether rural workers are physically residing in the home village or living elsewhere, as well as gender divisions of labor in migrant households as discussed earlier. By using a six-month criterion, we exclude short-term moves. Being away for six months is also the standard definition of migrants used by the NBSC and by many researchers who study migration in China (Knight, Deng, & Li, 2011; NBSC, 2016b).

### 5. Thirty-Five Years of Caregiving: The Story of Yingyue

Table 1 summarizes Yingyue's story. She was born in 1962 and went to primary school for five years before permanently dropping out of school. She was introduced by family members to Wanming, a fellow villager, and got married at 22 years old, in 1984. Wanming, a year older than Yingyue, had a junior high level of education and began doing migrant work at 19 years old. After he got married, he stayed in the village for several years, from 1984 to 1991, farming and helping to build houses for villagers. During that time, the couple built a house, and Yingyue gave birth to a son and a daughter. But in 1992, Wanming decided to do migrant work again:

We were so poor. There were no options but to go out.

From 1992 to 2001, Wanming worked as a construction worker in Ningbo, and Yingyue stayed in the village, farming and taking care of their young children and Wanming's parents. Yingyue's own parents, though living in the same village, were mainly taken care of by the wives of her two brothers. As discussed earlier, marriage signifies the transfer of a woman's membership to the husband's family, along with the shift of responsibility from the natal family. Accordingly, Yingyue visited her parents only occasionally and only when they needed help, but they rarely asked her to help, except during the time before her mother died.

Every year, Wanming would return home for the Spring Festival (Chinese New Year), leave afterward, return around October for harvest, and leave again until the next Spring Festival. The only exception was during 1994 when he was injured at work, which had him stay home for about six months before returning to Ningbo to



work again. The remittances that he brought back helped the family to expand their house.

In 2002, the household arrangement changed. For the first time, Yingyue joined the migrant workforce:

The reason I went out was because my daughter dropped out of school and took over my role to care for family members, particularly her brother. And, there is no money to be made at home [the village].

She followed her husband to Ningbo and worked as a construction helper. They lived on construction sites, and she cooked and did laundry for her husband. The couple changed work locations many times, going to places where new construction work could be found. Between 2002 and 2010, they worked in Ningbo (Zhejiang), Hefei (Anhui), Wuhu (Anhui), Shanghai, and Taizhou (Jiangsu). Wanming even attempted to become a contractor in 2006, though he was not successful and eventually went back to being a construction worker.

When Yingyue first did migrant work in 2002, she was 40 years old. Her commencing migrant work was related to her daughter's quitting school:

My daughter Lingling was born in 1988. When she was about 13 or 14 years old in grade 5, she was about to graduate from elementary school and start middle school. Who would have thought that the system would change that very year, from 5 years to 6 years of elementary school? So, she would need one more year to finish elementary school. The school fee was expensive! It was 200 Yuan per term, very expensive! So she decided to quit school.

How much was 200 Yuan at that time? In 2005, Wanming earned 10 Yuan a day as a construction worker. Assuming that his daily wage was 8 Yuan a day in 2002, Lingling's school fee per term would have cost the father 25 days of earnings. Perhaps, there was a more important reason for Lingling to quit school:

Coincidentally, both my husband and I were outside doing migrant work. So Lingling just stayed home to take care of her older brother who was in school. She cooked and washed clothes for him.

At 13 or 14 years of age, Lingling was already providing caregiving to a brother older than she. Her quitting school facilitated both of her parents to engage in migrant work and enabled her brother to focus on schooling because she took care of all household chores. In 2004, when Lingling's brother went to a boarding high school, she started migrant work in a factory in Ningbo, at the tender age of 15 or 16. On the contrary, her brother eventually not only finished high school but went to university.

Although Yingyue did not explain why her son was given the opportunity to continue schooling through uni-

versity while her daughter did not even finish elementary school, other than the cost of schooling, it is possible that gender played a key role. If Lingling were a boy, or if her brother were a girl, then the arrangement might have been different. Yingyue and Wanming's decisions for Lingling underscored persistent gender ideology and inequity in China, especially rural China, which prescribes women's and girls' roles in the family. First, women's and girls' main responsibility is caregiving, which shapes their destiny from very early in life and through the rest of their lives. They are expected to care for not only the husband, the children, and the elderly, but also male siblings. Second, women's and girls' physical labor should be intended to support and enable other family members, especially male family members, to pursue opportunities such as education and work. Finally, and given the above, education for girls is given a very low priority, whereas male family members have much easier and well-supported access to education.

In our 300-household survey, the average educational level of men and women above 18 years of age is respectively junior high and elementary school, and the percentage of university-level education is respectively 7.6% and 3.3%. Among the cohort born after 1990, including Lingling, the gender gap in educational attainment is still wide. The average education level of men and women in this cohort is respectively senior high and junior high, and the percentage of university-level education is respectively 27.3% and 4.0%.

In 2008, one of Yingyue's relatives introduced Lingling to a migrant worker who was four years older than she and had junior high education. The next year, Lingling got married, at the age of 21, and moved to her husband's village. She gave birth to a daughter two years later and a second daughter four years later. Throughout this time, the parents of Lingling—Yingyue and Wanming—continued their migrant work. Since getting married and until 2019, Lingling did not participate in migrant work because she was busy taking care of her two children and her parents-in-law, two elderlies who needed care. Her husband was the only breadwinner of Lingling's household. In 2019, although her older daughter was only 8 and her youngest daughter was only 4, Lingling was obligated to go out to work and bring home earnings because her husband was staying in the village to supervise the construction of their house and could not go out. Occasionally, Lingling's two daughters would stay with grandmother Yingyue, who stopped doing migrant work in 2012.

Yingyue and her husband decided to end their migrant worker's tenure and move back to the home village in 2012, as around the time Yingyue's son had graduated from university. Yingyue was 50 and Wanming was 51 then. Half-jokingly, Yingyue explained why they stopped migrant work:

My son no longer asked us for money, so there was no need to [do migrant] work anymore.

**Table 1.** Yingyue's household biography.

Year	Inside (I)– Outside (O)	Wife (Yingyue)		Husband (Wanming)		Other
		Age	Work	Age	Work	
1980–1983		18–21	Farming	19–22	Building cave dwellings (打窑; Shaanxi)	The future husband finished junior high. Followed friend to work, left after Spring Festival, returned for harvest.
1984–1986	II	22–24	Same	23–25	Farming; building houses	In 1984, got married, built a house.
1987	II	25	Same	26	Same	Birth of son.
1988	II	26	Same	27	Same	Birth of daughter.
1989–1991	II	27–29	Same	28–30	Same	
1992–1993	IO	30–31	Same	31–32	Construction worker (Ningbo)	
1994–2001	IO	32–39	Same	33–40	Same	In 1994, Wanming was injured at work, returned home for about 6 months. The couple expanded the house.
2002	OO	40	Construction helper (Ningbo)	41	Construction worker (Ningbo)	Daughter quit school (age 14; grade 5), helped to watch house, cared for brother. Yingyue followed the husband to go out.
2003	OO	41	Same	42	Same	
2004–2005	OO	42–43	Construction helper (Hefei)	43–44	Construction worker (Hefei)	In 2004, the son started boarding (high) school and the daughter went out the first time to work in a factory in Ningbo.
2006	OO	44	Construction helper (Wuhu)	45	Construction contractor (Wuhu)	Wanming lost money due to compensation for a worker's death.
2007–2008	OO	45–46	Construction helper (Shanghai)	46–47	Construction worker (Shanghai)	In 2008, the daughter moved to work in a factory in Shanghai; the son started university in Huangshan.
2009–2010	OO	47–48	Construction helper (Taizhou, Jiangsu)	48	Construction worker (Taizhou, Jiangsu)	In 2009, the daughter returned, got married.
2011	OO	49	Same	49–50	Same	The daughter gave birth to a daughter.
2012	II	50	Farming; caregiving	51	Farming; building houses	Built a new house. Son graduated from university, worked in Fujian.
2013	OO	51	Construction helper (Fujian)	52	Construction worker (Fujian)	Son got married, worked in Suzhou, Anhui.
2014	II	52	Farming; caregiving	53	Farming; building houses	Daughter-in-law gave birth to a son in the village.
2015–2016	II	53–54	Same	54–55	Same	In 2015, the daughter gave birth to her second daughter.
2017	II	55	Same	56	Same	Son bought an apartment in Suzhou, Anhui.
2018	OI	56	Caregiving (Suzhou)	57	Same	Grandson went to kindergarten in Suzhou.
2019	OI	57	Same	58	Same	The daughter went out to work in a factory in Ningbo. Son worked in Funan, Anhui.

In 2013, Yingyue's son got married, and found work in Suzhou (Anhui) in an environmental company. Her daughter-in-law also worked in the same city. In 2014, her daughter-in-law returned to the village to give birth and stayed there for six months before returning to Suzhou, leaving the baby boy to be taken care of by Yingyue and Wanming. Yingyue would care for the grandson and cook, while Wanming helped other villagers build houses. In 2017, Yingyue's son and daughter-in-law bought an apartment in Suzhou, and the next year brought their son, then three years old, to live with them and start pre-school. Yingyue then moved to Suzhou to care for the grandson. She paid for her own food even though she lived with her son and daughter-in-law:

I have only one son. Everything belongs to him.

When Yingyue's daughter and son had their own children, the attention given to them by Yingyue was very different. Yingyue continued migrant work when her daughter had the two children, but she returned when her daughter-in-law gave birth and she took care of the grandson so that her son and daughter-in-law could return to work. What's more, Yingyue left the village to stay with her son when he moved to a different city and needed caregiving help for his own son. Clearly, after the daughter got married, she was considered a member of her husband's family, whereas the son would always be considered part of Yingyue and Wanming's family. This clear delineation underscores the persistence of patriarchal and male-centric *modus operandi* in Chinese rural families. In Yingyue's case, it is difficult to tell if the gender of her grandchildren is a factor (she mostly cared for the grandson, the only boy among her three grandchildren), but the gender of her children certainly is. Notwithstanding, Yingyue is indeed willing to occasionally care for her daughter's two girls when needed. When asked why he did not join Yingyue and his son's family in Suzhou, Wanming explained:

We have a big house here. The [son's] apartment in Suzhou is so small; I can't even spread out my arms and legs.

In 2019, Yingyue was 57 years old and continued to provide caregiving to her grandchildren. The caregiving responsibility did not stop when her children were grown. She has come full circle and is now a caregiver again for the third generation, mainly for her son's son and occasionally for her daughter's children. After the age of 40, she joined migrant work and was not physically left behind by the migrant husband, but her primary role in the family has continued to be caregiving. As for her daughter, she too had left the village for migrant work, but she was left behind by her brother in terms of educational opportunities, and her role in marriage appeared to repeat her mother's, namely caregiving and supporting the husband and other family members.

With four *mu* of farmland (approximately 15 *mu* make up a hectare and 6 *mu* make up an acre), Yingyue and Wanming continued to farm, growing corn and wheat while they were doing migrant work. What's more, since 2017, they have started to farm the land that was left barren by relatives and friends who had left the village for migrant work. Yingyue and Wanming's stories highlight how rural Chinese and migrants are adept at engaging in different kinds of activities simultaneously—farming, migrant work, building houses, and caregiving—with flexibility in location and duration. They have never ceased to be farmers, unlike the new-generation migrants—referring to those born after 1980—many of whom have skipped farming altogether and jumped to migrant work after finishing or quitting school (Fan & Chen, 2013).

## 6. New-Generation Non-Farmer: The Story of Shuang

Table 2 summarizes the household biography of Shuang, a woman 30 years younger than Yingyue. Shuang was born in 1992, the third of four daughters in her family. As a teenager, she lived with her grandfather in the village, while her parents worked as migrant workers in Ningbo and brought all three other daughters there. Shuang was a good student at school, but she wanted to be reunited with her parents and sisters, and so she decided to quit school in grade 8 and moved to Ningbo in 2008 when she was 16 years old. She then became a new-generation (also second-generation) migrant worker, working first in a factory producing stationeries and later moving on to a textile factory:

We worked from 7 in the morning, to sometimes 9 or 10 in the evening. The whole day we were standing while working....It was hard to take in the beginning. My feet sore badly. After a while, I got used to it.

Between 2008 and 2012, Shuang worked in Ningbo and returned to her home village only during the Spring Festival. In 2012, when Shuang was 20, she was introduced to Kai, a fellow villager a year older than her and who began migrant work in 2009. They were engaged and got married in the village the same year. After the wedding, both Shuang and Kai returned to Ningbo, joining Kai's parents to do interior finishing work.

The next year, Shuang returned to the village to give birth. She was accompanied by her mother-in-law. Two months after giving birth, Shuang returned to Ningbo with her mother-in-law, taking the baby boy with them. In Ningbo, Shuang took care of the young child and cooked for the husband's family.

Shuang's own parents continued to work in Ningbo until 2018 when they decided to move to Yingshang, a small city near her home village. At Yingshang, their youngest daughter would attend senior high school and prepare for the college entrance examination.

In 2016, Shuang's parents-in-law returned to the village because their father, Kai's grandfather, became se-



riously ill and subsequently bedridden. They decided to find work in a nearby city, Fuyang, in order to both generate income and be close to the father. Shuang decided to return as well, with Kai and their three-year-old, to help the parents-in-law care for the sick elderly. Kai joined the courier company that his sister and brother-in-law started in Funan, another city close by, and rented an apartment there. He was later joined by Shuang and her mother-in-law, who opened a small restaurant to serve breakfast, for several months. Later that year, Kai's grandfather passed away. In early 2017, Shuang gave birth to her second child, a daughter. Since then, her main responsibility has been to take care of the two young chil-

dren in the home village, and she has not engaged in any income-generating work. That said, she decided to grow vegetables in the yard of the family's village house, and she was eager to show us the tomatoes that she grew:

I have had no farming experience. These [vegetables] are all from what I learned online. It's not that difficult. The vegetables that we grow ourselves taste better!

As a rural woman, raised in a village where farming was practically the only source of livelihood other than the pursuit of migrant work elsewhere, Shuang's success in growing vegetables is due to online information rather

**Table 2.** Shuang's household biography.

Year	Inside (I)– Outside (O)	Wife (Shuang)		Husband (Kai)		Other
		Age	Work	Age	Work	
2007		15	Student	16		Grade 7. Shuang's parents and 3 sisters all in Ningbo. Stayed with grandfather in village. Kai, the future husband and a fellow villager, was in grade 8.
2008		16	Stationary and textile factories (Ningbo)	17		Quit school in grade 8. Moved to Ningbo to join parents and sisters. Returned home during Spring Festival.
2009–2011		17–19	Same	18–20	Electronics factory (Suzhou)	In 2009, the future husband graduated from junior high and started to work in an electronics factory in Suzhou.
2012	OO	20	Garment factory (Ningbo); interior finishing (Ningbo)	21	Garment factory (Ningbo); interior finishing (Ningbo)	Returned home during Spring Festival and got engaged. Back to Ningbo. Fiancé moved to Ningbo. Returned home in October to get married. Joined husband and parents-in-law in interior finishing work.
2013	OO	21	Interior finishing (Ningbo)	22	Interior finishing (Ningbo)	Returned home with mother-in-law to give birth. Back to Ningbo when the son was 2 months old.
2014–2015	OO	22–23	Caregiving (Ningbo)	23–24	Same	Took care of the young child, cooked for the family.
2016	IO	24	Caregiving (village)	25	Courier business (Funan)	Returned home with mother-in-law to help care for elderly (grandfather of husband), who later passed. The husband joined sister in courier business in Funan. Shuang ran a small breakfast restaurant with mother-in-law in Funan for several months.
2017	IO	25	Same	26	Same	Birth of daughter.
2018	IO	26	Same	27	Same	Bought commodity apartment in a nearby town, for son's schooling, with financial help from parents-in-law.
2019	IO	27	Same	28	Same	Considering selling commodity apartment and buying a home in Funan. Wanted to move to Funan, where pre-school childcare is available (two and a half years up), and help husband's work to earn income.

than direct experience. This may be ironic, but it is a testament to how young generations of rural Chinese are increasingly similar to urban Chinese in terms of their sources of information, and unlike the older generation, they did not grow up as farmers.

In 2018, Kai and Shuang bought a three-bedroom apartment in a nearby town, with financial help from Kai's parents:

We bought the apartment for more than 400,000 Yuan. But I am not sure if that was the right decision. We bought it because my son [who turned 5] would start going to school....Someone has already offered us 500,000 yuan for the apartment....Maybe we should go to Funan instead. My son can go to school there. The pre-schools there accept children from two and a half years up. Once my daughter is old enough to go to a pre-school there, I can help Kai and make some money....I feel more comfortable bringing home some income, instead of always asking him for money, even though he has not said anything.

Kai returns to the village about once a week. Shuang remains the main person caring for the children, even though she does want to work and make money.

It's better to take care of your children yourself. That is still our priority. We have only one chance to educate our children.

Unlike Yingyue, Shuang's biography resembles that of new-generation migrants who have little or no farming experience, and who start migrant work early in life, soon after finishing school and before getting married. Like Yingyue's daughter Lingling (four years older than Shuang), Shuang quit school early and before finishing junior high, though for living with her parents and sisters and not due to caregiving responsibility. Within marriage, Shuang's story highlights a high degree of flexibility in terms of location, type of work, and household arrangement. It also shows how a family of several generations operates and makes mobility decisions as if it is one unit, involving inter-generational collaboration and division of labor. This seems to support the notion that Chinese families today tend to stick together as a safety net since state support and welfare are lacking (Ji, 2017).

But this safety net refers only to the husband's family and not to the natal family, from which a daughter's responsibility shifts after she gets married. Nevertheless, Shuang seems quite close to her natal family. By 2019, her parents were still quite young and were still working while taking care of their youngest daughter (Shuang's youngest sister) who was in high school. When Shuang's parents stayed in the village, she visited them every day. When they stayed in a nearby town, Shuang visited them once a week.

Compared with Yingyue's life story, Shuang's so far shows a higher degree of location choice, greater ca-

capacity to purchase homes outside the village, greater entrepreneurial spirit, and in general a higher standard of living. Similar to Yingyue and her generation, however, she continues to be a follower of her husband both in terms of location and work, except when caregiving needs arise that require her to change location in order to provide caregiving. To women, even young women of Shuang's generation, caregiving continues to take precedence, which may entail migration (physical mobility) and job change (work mobility). While Shuang places great importance on taking care of her own children, she is actively seeking out future locations that will allow her to resume income-generation work, suggesting that making money is an important component of her identity, one that is not being achieved via fulfilling caregiving responsibility alone. Perhaps, more active than the older generation of women, she is keenly exploring possible options to not being left behind, while believing in and honoring her expected caregiving responsibility.

## 7. Conclusion

Through Yingyue and Shuang's stories, this article has shown how two rural women from two generations made mobility and work decisions given their expected and gender roles in the family, especially in relation to caregiving responsibilities. The first story is about Yingyue, who is now in her late 50s. She was a left-behind wife until her daughter quit school, when she first migrated to the city to cook and do laundry for her husband at a construction site, as well as worked as a construction helper. Yingyue left behind two children, a teenage daughter who stopped schooling to take care of the village home and the older brother who eventually went to university. After Yingyue and her husband finished migrant work, she continued to circulate between the rural home to care for her husband and the city to care for her grandson as her son and daughter-in-law were busy with work. To Yingyue, caregiving is her primary role in the family, whether as a left-behind wife, a migrant wife, or a grandmother. Her daughter, too, was raised in the tradition that women's and girls' primary role is to support other males in the family.

The second story is about Shuang, who is in her late 20s and belongs to a generation that commenced migrant work soon after or even before finishing junior high, with no farming experience under their belt. Her migration and return decisions are made in tandem with her husband and parents-in-law, illustrating how family members are coordinated in order to maintain a safety net and meet each other's needs. Like the older generation of rural women, Shuang chose to stay behind to care for her young children while her husband works in the city. Unlike the older generation, she aspires to buy an apartment in a nearby city, where she can access daycare and undertake income-generating work again. Being able to earn income herself seems to be an important component of her identity, a sentiment that appears to be

stronger among the younger generation of women than the older generation.

While these two women both have had migration experiences, and despite the fact that they are of different generations and are at different points in their life cycle, they are alike in the sense that their expected caregiving roles and responsibilities as women dictate their decisions with regards to mobility, location, and work. These decisions are made possible by flexibility in geography and activity, including being left-behind, pursuing migrant work, returning to the village, circulating between the village and towns or cities, and engaging in both rural and urban work as well as caregiving often at the same time. In short, when one asks how and whether Chinese rural women are left behind, it is extremely insufficient to just pay attention to their location. Instead, it is important to focus on the sustained and persistent gender ideology that leaves women behind in terms of their access to education as well as economic opportunities that are constrained due to their prescribed and expected caregiving roles.

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### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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